

THE COURIER-JOURNAL  
TUESDAY,  
MARCH 11, 1997  
EDITOR: GREG JOHNSON  
PHONE: 582-4667 / FAX: 582-4665

## New trial would be for truth, not for Ray

The truth is out there.

Will Raoul ever be found?

Was some other gunman hired by a racist bounty hunter?

Could the federal government have prevented or discouraged the murder?

The answers are out there.

But, as with most controversies throughout the history of

we will not find the truth until years from now regarding the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Like the recently re-released revelations about the British knowing that Jews were being exterminated during World War II, the truth lies dormant, until

someone, a scholar or a reporter, digs through tons of once-classified documents.

Like the murder of Sen. Robert Kennedy, the truth waits to be revealed by someone facing death who wants to reveal a possible larger truth.

Someday we'll know what really happened on April 4, 1968, near the second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn. A new trial for confessed killer James Earl Ray would help get to the truth.

After the assassination, police found a rifle on the sidewalk across from the Lorraine Motel. It had Ray's fingerprints on it, and they believed it to be the murder weapon. After being shown the rifle and other evidence, Ray pleaded guilty to murder; he was sentenced to 99 years in prison.

Nearly 30 years later, the 68-year-old confessed assassin wants new tests conducted on the rifle and bullet police found. Such tests, he said, will prove that someone else shot King.

**IT'S NOT A NEW SONG** for the convicted criminal who fled Memphis moments after the killing and eluded police for two months in London, Canada and Portugal before being caught. Days after confessing, Ray tried to take back the plea, saying he wasn't alone. His utterances about a mysterious Raoul who told him to bring his rifle to Memphis have fueled debate among conspiracy believers for decades. Ray claims that he gave the rifle to Raoul before the shooting and that Raoul had the rifle dropped near the Lorraine Motel.

I haven't seen an account of Ray himself explaining why he pleaded guilty, but his attorney argues that he had no choice, so much evidence was stacked against him.

I see.

Overjoyed prosecutors point to the confession — one that state and federal courts have upheld seven times in 30 years — saying that, even if Ray didn't fire the gun, he's guilty of conspiracy.

"There might have been other people involved. But to say because

others were involved Ray should be released from jail is just nuts," state prosecutor John Campbell said in recent news reports.

**THERE HAVE BEEN** federal investigations; a House Select Committee on Assassinations found that a racist group in St. Louis offered \$50,000 to anyone who killed King. The committee also had the rifle tested, but it couldn't be determined whether the rifle was the murder weapon because the bullet was so mangled. Tests did show that King was killed with a similar rifle.

Close enough.

"Is the rule now that we don't believe guilty pleas?" asked G. Robert Blakey, chief counsel for the committee that probed the assassination, in an Associated Press story.

Ray's petition for rifle tests has been sent by a judge to an appellate court. Seven such requests have been denied.

King's family and various civil-rights leaders want a new trial so the truth will be known before Ray dies from liver disease.

"We must teach this nation where the roads of racial hatred lead," the Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery said on a segment of the Montel Williams TV show, where he and King's son, Dexter, urged that the gun be tested using modern means.

The truth is a powerful thing.

People can spend decades, centuries, searching for it.

It's the reason some still study the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the reason people still flock to the Texas School Book Depository, now a museum.

It's the reason that only a re-examination of King's murder will lay to rest the ghosts that have haunted the investigation since James Earl Ray declared that he didn't do it.

He may have. But if he did, who helped?

Rochelle Riley's column appears on Tuesdays and Thursdays in Features. She can be reached at (502) 582-4674 or at RILEY525@aol.com.



**ROCHELLE RILEY**